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Report on the activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

Audit of human resources management at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

"The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights needs additional delegation of authority in human resources management to improve operational efficiency"

Summary

Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 62/236, the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted an audit of human resources management at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Historically, OHCHR has had limited delegated authority for human resources management. The Office therefore recently requested the Office of Human Resources Management to provide additional delegation of authority for the recruitment of consultants and temporary staff and for the administration and approval of staff entitlements. However, at the time of the audit, no definitive decision had been made by the Office of Human Resources Management, although OHCHR had strengthened its administrative human resources capacity. OIOS is of the opinion that the existing arrangements are inefficient, resulting in duplication of effort by the United Nations Office at Geneva and OHCHR. OIOS also finds that the current situation has sometimes blurred accountability for management decisions.

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Overall, the recruitment of staff in OHCHR was conducted in a fair and competitive manner in terms of the requirements stipulated in ST/AI/2006/3, on the staff selection system. With regard to the recruitment of consultants, however, OIOS found that OHCHR programme managers often relied on informal networks and contacts to source candidates. That practice lacked transparency and contributed to perceptions of bias. OHCHR needs to ensure the competitive selection of consultants by identifying opportunities for such employment on its website and recruiting suitable candidates in a transparent manner.

The average number of days taken to fill OHCHR vacancies during the period from December 2006 to June 2008 was 241, as compared with the goal of 120 days indicated in the OHCHR human resources action plan. Delays in recruitment were caused by both internal and external factors, including delays in pre-screening the large number of applications and the cancellation of a large number of vacancy announcements, which were later reissued. Since February 2008, the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights has instituted mechanisms to closely monitor the vacancy situation and given top priority to vacancy management.

In the period from 2005 to 2008, OHCHR had opportunities to improve geographical representation during: (a) the post regularization exercise; (b) recruitment arising from the doubling of resources; and (c) recruitment for additional posts to support the universal periodic review of the Human Rights Council. During that period, of the 220 candidates selected by OHCHR, 21 were recruited from unrepresented and underrepresented countries, 65 from overrepresented countries and 134 from countries within the desirable range. As at 31 December 2008, 74 vacant posts were funded by the regular budget and 52 vacant posts were funded by extrabudgetary resources. As such, there continue to be opportunities for further improvement in terms of geographical representation. OIOS is of the opinion that OHCHR needs to develop a strategy to enhance the recruitment of staff from unrepresented and underrepresented countries.

I. Introduction

1. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 62/236, the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted an audit of human resources management at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).[1]

2. OHCHR was established by General Assembly resolution 48/141, which mandated the High Commissioner for Human Rights to promote and protect the enjoyment and full realization by all people of all rights established in the Charter of the United Nations and in international human rights instruments. The priorities of OHCHR are based on the 2005 Plan of Action, transformed into two-year strategic management plans. In the High Commissioner's second strategic management plan for 2008-2009, key priorities relate to greater country engagement, working closely with regional, country and local partners for the implementation of human rights on the ground, strengthening the leadership role of the High Commissioner, improving partnerships with civil society and United Nations agencies and improving synergy with human rights bodies.

3. In the context of its recent growth, OHCHR has undertaken three major recruitment initiatives since 2005: a post regularization exercise; the doubling of resources efforts; and an increase in staff to support the universal periodic review. In the period from June 2005 to February 2006, 119 short-term posts were regularized, mainly to end the practice of employing long-serving staff on short-term contracts. During the biennium 2006-2007, the General Assembly authorized 80 new posts under the regular budget in the Professional and higher categories, so that by November 2007, OHCHR staff exceeded 920, with more than half located in the 11 country and 9 regional offices. Subsequently, the budget for the biennium 2008-2009 proposed an additional 36 new posts, including 26 in the Professional category to support the universal periodic review.

4. The objectives of the audit were to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of internal controls in human resources management at OHCHR, including compliance with relevant United Nations staff regulations and rules pertaining to the recruitment of staff and consultants.

II. Delegation of authority in administrative areas of human resources management

5. In his report on accountability and responsibility (A/55/270), the Secretary-General stated that in order to be held accountable for discharging their responsibilities, managers needed authority and control over their human and financial resources, timely and accurate information about the status of resources assigned to them, and training as required.

6. The human resources management functions of OHCHR were limited to vacancy management, evaluation of applicants and recommendation of selected candidates based upon approval by the central review bodies. OHCHR did not have

[1] Para. 101 of resolution 62/236 requested a comprehensive review of human resources management in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the efficiency of the implementation of its mandate. The present report addresses the first part of the request; a separate report (A/64/203) addresses the second part.

the authority to approve personnel actions. The United Nations Office at Geneva had responsibility for oversight and approval of actions related to human resources management pertaining to OHCHR, as well as other Geneva-based offices.

7. In February 2006, citing the planned increase in its administrative capacity, OHCHR requested the Office of Human Resources Management to grant it delegation of authority for the recruitment of consultants and temporary staff subject to the 300 series of the Staff Rules and for the administration and approval of staff entitlements. In May 2006, the Office responded to the initial request, taking note of the efforts made by OHCHR to build up capacity. The Office of Human Resources Management indicated that it would grant the request upon the establishment of increased administrative capacity at OHCHR, with consideration given to the capacity of the United Nations Office at Geneva as a provider of administrative services for all Geneva-based offices. Subsequently, OHCHR strengthened its Human Resources Management Section by appointing, in March 2007, a Chief of Section at the P-5 level, which brought the staff capacity of the Section to five Professional and seven General Service staff members and one Junior Professional Officer. In contrast, the United Nations Office at Geneva had only one human resources officer and two assistants to service OHCHR, with one assistant handling all consultants for agencies serviced by the Geneva Office. In June 2007, OHCHR reiterated its request, but no definitive decision was undertaken on the matter by the Office of Human Resources Management.

8. The existing delegation of authority resulted in inefficient operations, as set out below:

(a) There was duplication of work between the United Nations Office at Geneva and OHCHR. According to the memorandum of understanding between the parties, OHCHR is responsible for the accuracy and completeness of information submitted and entered into the Integrated Management Information System (IMIS), as well as other information sent to the United Nations Office at Geneva. OHCHR is considered the certifying office and the United Nations Office at Geneva the approving office. The Human Resources Management Section of OHCHR gathered, reviewed and entered the required information into IMIS and submitted relevant documentation to the Human Resources Management Service of the United Nations Office at Geneva for approval. The Financial Resources Management Service of the United Nations Office at Geneva then reviewed the transactions in IMIS and made disbursements. In view of the increased administrative capacity established at OHCHR, the existing procedures could be streamlined by giving approval authority to OHCHR, with the Financial Resources Management Service conducting the final review during the disbursement of payments;

(b) Accountability for OHCHR human resources management decisions was sometimes blurred. While OHCHR has programme and budgetary responsibility, its human-resources-related actions were approved by the United Nations Office at Geneva. This resulted in conflicts regarding the requirements and responsibility for carrying out certain functions, such as background checks of consultants. Further delegation of authority to OHCHR would clearly place accountability and responsibility for such actions with OHCHR. The human resources action plan, a tool used by the Office of Human Resources Management to monitor activities related to human resources management throughout the Secretariat, provides a viable mechanism to monitor the exercise of the delegation of authority by a

department of the Secretariat. In addition, the Office of Human Resources Management could regularly review and monitor personnel actions to ensure compliance with the Staff Regulations and Rules of the United Nations. OIOS is of the view that OHCHR should pursue with the Office of Human Resources Management its case for additional delegation of authority, in accordance with the report of the Secretary-General on accountability and responsibility (A/55/270).

III. Vacancy management

9. As at 31 December 2008, there were 74 vacant regular budget posts and 52 vacant extrabudgetary posts. According to the United Nations Office at Geneva, the average number of days taken to fill OHCHR vacancies (i.e., the number of days from the issuance of the vacancy announcement to the date of the selection decision by the head of department) during the period from December 2006 to June 2008 was 241 days, as against the goal of 120 days indicated in the OHCHR human resources action plan for 2007-2008. OHCHR had expressed its concerns to the Office of Human Resources Management regarding the goal of 120 days and the difficulty that it would have in meeting it, largely as a result of organizational growth. OHCHR noted that the goal of 120 days had been established on the basis of the assumption that the vast majority of candidates selected by a department would be internal candidates, which would considerably reduce recruitment time. OHCHR also attributed recruitment delays to both internal and external factors, including delays in pre-screening the high number of applicants and changes in staffing field offices owing to Government decisions.

10. The cancellation of vacancies contributed to delays in the recruitment process. The number of vacancy announcements cancelled in the period from the beginning of 2004 to June 2008 was 113. Most of these were cancelled in 2006 (48 cancellations) and 2007 (39 cancellations). Vacancies were cancelled and re-advertised for a number of reasons, including (a) changes in country agreements; (b) selected candidates declining the offer of appointment; (c) the revision of a vacancy announcement or the reclassification of posts; and (d) disagreement between OHCHR and the central review bodies on the candidates recommended.

11. Since February 2008, the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights has monitored the status of vacancies and conducted monthly meetings to review recruitment actions, which have been followed by discussions with the senior management team. Thus, it appears that the leadership of OHCHR has made vacancy management a top priority.

IV. Staff recruitment process

12. Overall, OIOS found that OHCHR had conducted a fair and competitive recruitment process and adhered to the requirements of ST/AI/2006/3, on the staff selection system. At the time of the audit, the recruitment of additional staff for field offices and to support the universal periodic review was in progress.

13. The vacancy announcements pertaining to OHCHR resulted in a large number of applications. The United Nations Office at Geneva sometimes had to pre-screen thousands of applicants for an advertised post. Inadequate pre-screening of

applicants in the Galaxy system often resulted in the release of unqualified applicants and, in some instances, the omission of qualified candidates. Programme case officers in OHCHR had to review more than 250 applicants per vacancy, which extended the recruitment period.

14. The interpretation of evaluation criteria by OHCHR programme case officers and the members of the central review bodies also contributed to delays in the recruitment process. The central review bodies sometimes went beyond reviewing process regularity to scrutinize an individual candidate's qualifications. That situation resulted in disagreements, primarily as a result of differences in opinion regarding interpretation of the evaluation criteria, candidates' qualifications, terminology or semantics and when determining the number or type of years of work experience of the recommended candidates. When the central review bodies and OHCHR could not resolve such cases, they were submitted to the Office of Human Resources Management for a decision, causing further delays. OIOS is of the view that the Office of Human Resources Management should further clarify the respective focus of the central review bodies and the programme case officers' roles with regard to the selection process.

V. Geographical representation

15. The General Assembly and the Human Rights Council have, on a number of occasions, directed OHCHR to improve geographical representation. OHCHR, with the guidance and approval of the Office of Human Resources Management, put in place temporary recruitment measures to help address the geographical imbalance. Although those measures helped to address the imbalance in geographical representation at OHCHR, representation from unrepresented or underrepresented countries needed further improvement. In the period from 2005 to 2008, OHCHR had opportunities to improve geographical representation during: (a) the post regularization exercise; (b) recruitment arising from the doubling of resources; and (c) recruitment for the additional posts to support the universal periodic review of the Human Rights Council. During that period, of the 220 candidates selected by OHCHR, 21 were recruited from unrepresented and underrepresented countries, 65 from overrepresented countries and 134 from countries within the desirable range. The table below shows the results of those exercises, as well as the overall geographical representation of staff at OHCHR.

Geographical distribution of recruits — 2005 to 2008 by number and percentage

	2005-2006 regularization		*2006-2007 doubling of resources*		*2008 universal periodic review*		*Overall staffing at OHCHR as at 31 December 2008*	
Recruits from:	*No.*	*Percentage*	*No.*	*Percentage*	*No.*	*Percentage*	*No.*	*Percentage*
Overrepresented countries	38	32	22	28	5	23	61	19
Unrepresented or underrepresented countries	11	9	6	8	4	18	22	7
Countries within desirable range	70	59	51	64	13	59	234	74
Total	**119**		**79**		**22**		**317**	

16. In the post regularization exercise, staff members who had served OHCHR for at least two years under a temporary appointment as at 30 November 2002 were considered as eligible at the 30-day mark, rather than at the 60-day mark, under the provisions of ST/AI/2006/3, on the staff selection system. As shown in the table, 9 per cent of the applicants were selected from unrepresented or underrepresented countries, 32 per cent from overrepresented countries and 59 per cent from countries within the desirable range. Under the recruitment for posts in the doubling of resources exercise, of the 80 posts authorized for the biennium 2006-2007, OHCHR filled 79, decreasing recruitment from overrepresented countries by 4 per cent, marginally decreasing recruitment from unrepresented or underrepresented countries and increasing recruitment from countries within the desirable range. As at 30 November 2008, the result of the recruitment exercise for additional posts for the universal periodic review showed a decrease in recruitment from overrepresented countries, an increase from unrepresented or underrepresented countries and a decrease from countries within the desirable range.

17. In order to improve geographical representation, OHCHR would need to develop a strategy to enhance the recruitment of staff from unrepresented and underrepresented countries. OHRM should provide guidance towards that end.

VI. Recruitment of consultants

A. Earlier planning and identification of the need for consultants could reduce the impact of delays in recruitment

18. OHCHR requested the United Nations Office at Geneva to process 184 consultants' contracts in 2007 and 86 in the first half of 2008, amounting to $1.4 million and $0.744 million, respectively. The average number of days taken by OHCHR and the United Nations Office at Geneva to process a consultancy contract, from formal submission of requests to the substantive offices to final approval by the Geneva Office, was 30 days in 2007 and 26 days in 2008. OHCHR staff reported having invested a significant amount of time in obtaining the necessary documentation from the branches before being able to submit the formally signed requests to the United Nations Office at Geneva. Owing to the lack of reliable data, OHCHR could not quantify the time between identifying the need for consultants and formally submitting requests. However, OHCHR staff reported that the submission of incomplete documentation by OHCHR substantive offices resulted in longer lead times in recruiting consultants. Nonetheless, the introduction by the United Nations Office at Geneva of more standardized documentation, checklists and procedures for use by both OHCHR and the Geneva Office reduced the processing time for formal requests in 2008. Failure to contract consultants on time increased the risk of delay in project implementation and contributed to reduced compliance with rules regarding the employment of consultants, such as starting work without a contract having been signed. OHCHR could reduce the impact of the delays in recruiting consultants by requiring programme managers to start the process of recruiting consultants sufficiently early — from the time that the need for their services was identified. This would ensure that the consultants were deployed in a timely manner.

B. Competition and transparency in recruiting consultants should be enhanced

19. ST/AI/1999/7 requires that departments and offices consider several qualified candidates for each assignment, and that the central roster of candidates being developed by the Office of Human Resources Management be used for sourcing candidates as soon as it is operational. OIOS found that such a central roster had yet to be established. Instead, OHCHR programme managers often relied on their personal networks to identify consultants. Those networks were made up of former staff, interns, non-governmental organizations or other contacts. Such contacts were not usually shared within OHCHR but were known to individual staff within a particular division. This practice lacked transparency and contributed to perceptions of bias.

20. The selection process for consultants was tedious, often resulted in tension between OHCHR and the United Nations Office at Geneva regarding the candidates' qualifications and was perceived by the Geneva Office as favouring certain consultants or individual contractors. OIOS noted that OHCHR advertised some employment opportunities on its website. The notification of employment opportunities could be expanded to include consultants and short-term staff. Jobs governed by the 200 series of the Staff Rules advertised on the OHCHR website provided a detailed description of duties and responsibilities. OHCHR needs to ensure the competitive selection of consultants by instituting a similar practice, especially for technical experts.

21. ST/AI/1999/7 requires that, prior to the issuance of a contract, the processing office shall verify the academic and professional credentials of the candidate recommended for selection. OHCHR staff believed that that was the responsibility of the Human Resources Management Service of the United Nations Office at Geneva, whereas the latter believed that it was the responsibility of OHCHR. As such, it was not always evident that background checks were conducted. OIOS is of the opinion that it would be more appropriate for the office in need of technical service or expertise to conduct the background or reference checks as part of the assessment of candidates prior to recommending the selected candidate.

VII. Recommendations

Recommendation 1

22. OHCHR should pursue its case with the Office of Human Resources Management for additional delegation of authority in matters relating to human resources management.

23. *OHCHR accepted recommendation 1, stating that it would pursue with the Office of Human Resources Management the issue of the additional delegation of authority for human resources management and that a review of the issue was already under way in the light of the new staff selection system. The Office of Human Resources Management indicated that it had reviewed, within the context of the human resources management reform effort, the delegation of authority to heads of departments, offices away from Headquarters/regional commissions/tribunals, including to the heads of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs,*

the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and OHCHR. The Office of Human Resources Management confirmed that it would delegate authority to OHCHR for the recruitment and authorization of consultants and individual contractors as well as for other human resources areas, in accordance with established regulations, rules and procedures. The Chief of the Human Resources Management Service of the United Nations Office at Geneva would arrange the necessary training and standard operating procedures in order for the relevant OHCHR staff to assume that responsibility.

Recommendation 2

24. The Human Resources Management Service of the United Nations Office at Geneva should further clarify the respective focus of the central review bodies and of the programme case officers' roles with regard to the selection process.

25. *OHCHR stated that it would raise the issue with the United Nations Office at Geneva.*

Recommendation 3

26. OHCHR, in consultation with the Office of Human Resources Management, should develop a strategy to enhance the recruitment of staff from unrepresented and underrepresented countries.

27. *OHCHR stated that it had a specific target in its human resources action plan for the recruitment of staff from unrepresented and underrepresented countries. The High Commissioner's efforts towards improving geographical representation showed that OHCHR had surpassed by about 9 per cent its 20 per cent geographical recruitment target for 2007 and 2008. The Office of Human Resources Management indicated that it would consult with OHCHR to assess the situation and develop a strategy to enhance the recruitment of staff from unrepresented and underrepresented countries.*

Recommendation 4

28. OHCHR should further reduce the impact of delays in recruiting consultants by starting the recruitment process sufficiently early, from the time the need for such services is identified.

29. *OHCHR accepted recommendation 4, stating that progress needed to be made in reducing the delays in recruiting consultants through better enforcement of the deadlines set for the submission by managers of requests for consultants. In addition, OHCHR noted that the nature of its work was such that there would always be occasions when unplanned needs arose that had to be met at very short notice.*

Recommendation 5

30. OHCHR should ensure the competitive selection of consultants by notifying opportunities for such employment on its website.

31. *OHCHR did not accept recommendation 5, stating that it was following rules set out in ST/AI/1999/7 and did not believe that advertising opportunities for consultants on the OHCHR website would add any value at this stage. It indicated, however, that it would review the recommendation, depending on how the development of the roster of consultants proceeded. OHCHR had been working with the United Nations Office at Geneva to develop a central roster of consultants, which it intended to use when finalized and operational. OHCHR also noted that it had made strides in improving both gender and geographical diversity of its consultants, as attested by its human resources action plan.* In the opinion of OIOS, the posting of opportunities for consultants' services on the OHCHR website could extend the reach of OHCHR to potential qualified consultants and improve competition. OIOS therefore reiterates recommendation 5, and requests OHCHR to reconsider its initial position on the matter.

Recommendation 6

32. OHCHR should clarify with the Human Resources Management Service of the United Nations Office at Geneva the responsibility for consultants' reference checks.

33. *OHCHR accepted recommendation 6, stating that it would raise the issue with the United Nations Office at Geneva. In practice, programme managers in many cases carried out informal reference checks of consultancies under consideration, and the decision on which consultant to recommend was based partly on such reference checks.*